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Gates' Support Wanes; Delay in Vote Expected

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WASHINGTON—Several leading members of the Senate Intelligence Committee said Wednesday that they are reluctant to confirm Robert M. Gates as director of the CIA because of growing indications that he was involved in an effort to cover up the Iran arms affair.

The committee members are particularly upset by new assertions that Gates helped in drafting an erroneous chronology of events prepared by the White House last November that may have masked President Reagan's involvement in arms sales to Tehran, sources said.

"It's getting more and more serious every day," a key Senate source said. "It's a question of what he has told the committee. He forgot to tell us that he helped in preparing the chronology."

Delay Favored

As a result, a number of committee members favor delaying consideration of the nomination as long as necessary, until an investigation determines exactly what role Gates played. Meanwhile, they said, Gates could continue to serve as acting CIA director.

"Most members are not prepared to vote now," said Sen. Sam Nunn (D-Ga.). "I'm certainly not in favor of voting now."

Also expressing support for a delay were Sens. Arlen Specter (R-Pa.), Alan Cranston (D-Calif.) and Dennis DeConcini (D-Ariz.).

Nunn, who said he has not decided how he will vote, added that Gates still apparently has the support of a majority of committee members. But he also suggested

that a vote on the nomination would be close at this time.

"Maybe it would carry right now—but I emphasize maybe," Nunn said.

The committee is expected to discuss a delay when it meets next week to hear closed-door testimony from Gates. Chairman David L. Boren (D-Okla.) and Vice Chairman William S. Cohen (R-Me.) issued a joint statement Wednesday, saying the committee would at that time "make a determination on how to proceed with the nomination."

Even if the committee does vote to confirm Gates, sources said, Senate Majority Leader Robert C. Byrd (D-W.Va.) may be unwilling to bring the nomination up for a vote on the Senate floor. Byrd has said he fears that an investigation will prove that Gates was more involved in the Iran-contra affair than he contends.

Nunn and Specter said they are concerned about Gates' role in preparing testimony for then-CIA Director William J. Casey to deliver before the committee last November. Casey did not tell the committee about the diversion of funds to the Nicaraguan rebels, despite what Nunn described as "the whole array of evidence" that the director and Gates had collected on the subject.

"That bothered me and it still bothers me," said Nunn, who added that Atty. Gen. Edwin Meese III launched a full-scale investigation into the matter last November on the basis of less information than Casey and Gates possessed at the time.

Specter said he believes that

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Gates made "an inaccurate characterization" when he told the committee that he was not personally involved in preparing the testimony. "My conclusion is that Robert Gates was a major participant in preparing Director Casey's testimony," he said.

He said many senators are afraid to vote now because they fear that their vote will look foolish once all of the facts of the case are known. "There is a growing sense of concern as to what may come out at a later time," Specter said.

"You really have a whole pattern here of calculated concealment, and when you put Mr. Gates in that kind of a pattern, it becomes even more of a problem than if you take his own conduct in isolation."

DeConcini said he is "leaning against" Gates but would prefer a delay for the same reasons expressed by Specter. "If he ends up being a key player, that would be embarrassing for those who voted for him," he said.

Sources said some committee members first learned from an article in Time magazine about Gates' alleged role in the preparation of the erroneous chronology, but that report has since been confirmed independently by Senate investigators.

Among other things, the chronology excluded the role that the President allegedly played in approving an Israeli shipment of weapons to Iran in late 1985.

In addition to Gates' alleged role in the preparation of Casey's testimony as well as the bogus chronology, some senators also have expressed reservations about Gates because of reports that he was the author of a plan for a joint U.S.-Egyptian invasion of Libya last year that Secretary of State George

P. Shultz succeeded in defeating.

Boren and Cohen, both of whom are believed to favor confirmation of Gates, declined to comment on the proposed delay. Sources said Boren has been meeting frequently with Gates in an effort to answer some of the questions raised by members of the committee.

These sources said Boren has expressed fears that, if the Senate rejects Gates, President Reagan will nominate someone even less acceptable to the committee. Among those who have been mentioned is Sen. Malcolm Wallop (R-Wyo), who despite his membership in the Senate is considered too conservative by most committee members.

Sen. John W. Warner (R-Va.), a strong supporter of Gates, argued that the CIA director should be confirmed quickly to provide leadership to the agency during the turmoil of the Iran-contra investigation.

"I think it's in our national interest to have as early as possible a CIA director confirmed by the U.S. Senate and directing U.S. intelligence," he said. "I hope that Gates will be confirmed expeditiously."

But Cranston disagreed with Warner, noting that Gates is now running the agency in his role of acting director. "So he'll continue to be there doing his work—but put there by the President and not by us," he said.